Back to School for a Reality (PR) Check?

Abstract: It is 20 years since Grunig and Hunt first claimed normative status for what they labelled the two-way symmetric model of public relations. Although this model is not without its critics and detractors, in the absence of any real alternatives it nonetheless remains a significant influence in the field. One of the greatest challenges facing public relations practitioners today is how to reconcile the idea of two-way symmetric communication – which has long been suggested as the Holy Grail of public relations – with the *reality* of lived public relations practice. The situation of public relations practitioners in schools on Queensland's Gold Coast in the twenty-first century provides an interesting microcosmic case study of these challenges, and might give some insights into wider applications within the broader profession. Directions for future research are flagged: in particular, the High Performance Schools Initiative is suggested as providing a site where the possible benefits of dialogue between organisations and publics, as well as the potential pitfalls in its implementation, can be explored.

It is 20 years since Grunig and Hunt (Grunig, 1984; Grunig & Hunt, 1984) first claimed normative status for what they labelled the two-way symmetric model of public relations[1]. Since then, perceived difficulties with both the abstract model and its practical implementation have resulted in considerable resistance to its acceptance as the ideal form for public relations generally. Quite simply, critics feel that the two-way symmetric model is naïve, overly-idealistic and has no place in the real world of public relations. Practitioners, faced with the day-to-day reality of facilitating communication between organisations and their publics, strongly question what advantage is to be gained by spending time and effort in a quest for mutual responsiveness that seems doomed to failure from the outset. In the real world, they argue, inequalities in power and resources between organisations and publics (especially those weighted in favour of the organisation) are unlikely to be forfeited to gain something as nebulous and intangible as goodwill. Even if public relations professionals choose to accept the 'Holy Grail' status of symmetric dialogue, there remains the vexed question of practicalities: how (assuming the organisation-centric position so common in much academic theorising) do you find out what your publics want? How do you ensure that those publics are open to change and accommodating of organisational desires? And what do you do if your publics are not homogenous in their needs?

In order to address some of these issues, the attitudes and actions of public relations practitioners in state schools on the Gold Coast is currently being examined. This area of practice might not immediately suggest itself as being an ideal environment to provide case study material. It is an area that is desperately under-researched and under-theorised to the extent that much of the available data comes from student studies, albeit at a postgraduate level.

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[1] This model is characterised by the free and equal flow of information between an organisation and its publics, leading to mutual understanding and responsiveness.

In addition, it is often difficult to isolate the public relations function from the many other communication flows that occur between schools and their publics. In some ways, the situation of public relations practitioners in Australian schools in the twenty-first century could be seen as a microcosmic compound of the greatest challenges facing the profession generally. A limited pilot study[2] suggests that this field is populated by de facto practitioners who often do not – perhaps even *will* not – identify themselves as belonging to the public relations 'family'. Indeed, the majority of public relations functions in the schools surveyed are carried out by principals or head teachers. They usually have no training or education in public relations and operate at a largely technical level. They produce collateral on an ad hoc basis with little or no strategic planning and very limited resources. Understandings of the role of public relations in these situations are of necessity therefore limited and often its potential remains largely unappreciated and unrealised. In fact, it is this very lack of self-consciousness and self-awareness that makes this environment so suitable for further study.

One of the most interesting aspects of this situation – and one that makes it so apt as a choice for the in-depth research currently being undertaken – is the recent trend towards incorporating community participation as a measurable objective in schools' reporting frameworks. Interestingly, the global perception of the form and function of the educational system has undergone a similar cultural turn to that experienced by the field of public relations in the last 30 years or so. In both fields there has been a move away from didactic, one-sided interactions towards a more open, accommodating and balanced attitude to relations beyond (and within) the organisation. In public relations, Grunig and Hunt (1984), Grunig and Huang (2000), Henderson (2000), Kent and Taylor (2002), Leitch and Neilson (1997) and Signitzer and Coombs (1992) – among many others – have identified a trend towards more relationship-focused, dialogic forms of the practice. Some analysts, such as Pearson (1991), go even further and add that such dialogue is a precondition for ethical public relations; and Ferguson (1984) states that "the public relations theorist assumes "social responsibility" is a first premise" (p.15). Given the apparent similarity of discourse trends in the areas of education and public relations, the area of overlap between them obviously deserves much closer attention from academics and practitioners in Australian public relations.

The idea of looking at the role of public relations in schools might not seem terribly strange or challenging, but it is an area that has received scant attention in Australia. In America there are specialist organisations – such as the National Schools Public Relations Association and Phi Delta Kappa – devoted entirely to formulating and promulgating best practice in this highly-competitive field (see for example Kinder, 2000; Wilson & Rossman, 1986). Other groups such as the National Education Association of the United States also acknowledge the importance of public relations practitioners in the day-to-day operations of American schools at all levels. Although Australia has its own peak public relations professional body (the Public Relations Institute of

[2] Although it is not intended that undue emphasis be placed on this small study, it is important as an initial source of information and is therefore drawn upon with that caveat.

Australia) – which doubtless provides generic support to practitioners in schools – there are no equivalent specialist organisations in this country[3]. It is no surprise therefore that the vast majority of literature specifically about the practical role of public relations in schools comes from America. Even there, academic analysis of this area is still in its infancy, but nonetheless it is beginning to receive some attention (see for example Merz & Furman, 1997; Sheldon, 2003). The few academic works examining interactions between schools and publics in Australia (none of which adopt the public relations perspective) feature studies conducted in Victoria, the Australian Capital Territories and New South Wales (see for example Gamage, 1996; 1998). Queensland remains largely untouched as a site for analysis although Cranston's studies (Cranston, 2000; Cranston, Dwyer, & Limerick, 2000) have addressed the role of teachers in leading some forms of dialogic interchange with parents in the state, particularly in relation to curriculum change. In Australia, it seems, the concept of schools as organisations that could, should or do practise public relations in any structured way is still not widely acknowledged.

The reasons for this perceived lack of appreciation are complex and complicated, and may well have much to do with the unique nature of the relationship between schools and their 'customers' or 'clients'. In Queensland – as in the rest of Australia – the law requires that children are provided with an education (Australasian Legal Information Institute, 2002). Although students and their parents have a considerable degree of autonomy in their choice of school, there are very few who exercise the option of home schooling: most will choose to participate in the mainstream educational system, either at a state or a private school. In Queensland in 2004, only 77 children out of a student population of around half a million were being educated at home (Education Queensland, 2004). In essence therefore the school system as a whole is dealing with a captive audience. This means that schools could be said to be operating outside the boundaries of conventional understandings of business. Even customers of a monopolistic supplier of goods or services usually have the choice to opt out of the relationship altogether: not so with school students. Schools are in a uniquely powerful position in relation to their 'customers', in a situation where the usual laws of the marketplace often do not apply. As a result, it is arguable that schools have not had the market-driven impetus to cultivate good relations with their publics that has motivated the development of public relations in other fields.

In addition, it is worth noting that in Queensland (as elsewhere in Australia) schools' funding arrangements mean that many taxpayers – the ultimate source of government financial support for both state and private schools – are contributing to a service which they do not themselves use, and in which they have no direct say. This is one area where the Australian system varies considerably from the American. American schools have to present annual

[3] The National Schools Public Relations Association has been established in America for over 65 years, and has 40 chapters across the country (National Schools Public Relations Association, 2004). No directly corresponding organisation exists in Australia although the Association of Development and Alumni Professionals in Education (ADAPE) has some similarities (Association of Development and Alumni Professionals in Education, 2004).

projected budgets directly to the community – including senior citizens and other groups who are not directly involved in the 'consumption' of education – for approval and authorisation (Carroll, 2001). This requirement to communicate with, and seek approval from, such publics on financial issues is not the case in Australia. The operations of Education Queensland (EQ) – the state branch of government that deals with education matters and the allocation of funds – are the subject of public scrutiny and comment but until recently there has been little perceived need for schools to communicate directly with external publics, let alone to foster meaningful relationships with them. Essentially, therefore, Queensland schools are in the unique position of dealing with captive consumers in a relationship where the purchasers of the service are not the actual users, and where there has been no significant history of public communication (legally-required or voluntary).

In previous years, school public relations practitioners found themselves primarily called upon to play a supporting role to the marketing function, with management placing little emphasis on the ideas of creating and enhancing relationships with publics. This is despite the fact that Queensland state schools are not officially required to operate at a profit. Indeed they "must be able to justify, in terms of future planning, any cash reserves carried forward from one year to the next" (Education Queensland, 2002). However, the principles of profit-making and marketing generally are not alien to the education sector. Anecdotal evidence obtained in the pilot study in this area suggests that private schools have long followed business models in marketing their 'product', and have been at the vanguard of schools appointing specialist professionals in that area. EQ clearly states its view of its own role in this field in *Queensland State Education – 2010:* "The role for government in an informed market is to maintain a strong state system, so that the value of choice really exists" (Education Queensland, 1999a, p.14). The emergence of such a 'marketised' approach to education in Australia is a phenomenon that has begun to draw attention in recent years, both academically and practically (see for example Holmes, 1998; Marginson, 1997; Vining, 2002). These attitudes are reflected in the impressive range of information for schools that EQ itself publishes on just how they should go about marketing themselves. Particularly commented on has been a recent tendency for state schools to adopt marketing tactics that had previously only been used by private schools ("Marketing needed to stimulate attendance," 1999). This was first noted in America, but seems to be on the increase in Australia – Holmes (1998), P. Hughes (1988), Kenway (1995), and Vining (2002) have all identified and analysed the impact and implications of the rise of economic rationalism in state education in this country. This rise has not gone unremarked or unchallenged: as a member of a prominent American association of school librarians notes, "When we think of marketing, our service-oriented hackles are raised as we consider ourselves to be above the marketing mindset" (in Bush & Kwielford, 2001, p.8).

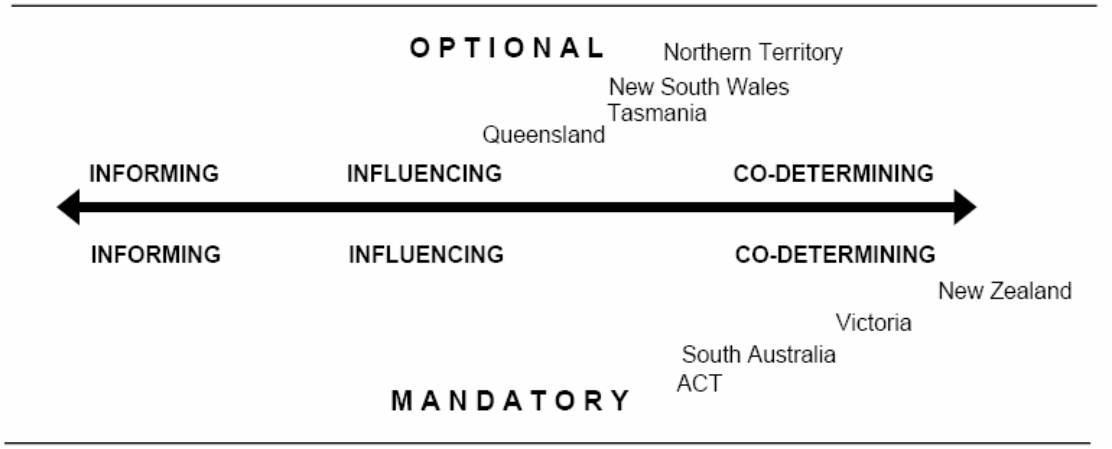
The disparaging nature of such comments about the place of businesslike approaches to education is something that was echoed on occasion during the case studies carried out as part of the Queensland pilot schools public relations study. The relationship between public relations and marketing is, of

course, very complex and people will often use the terms interchangeably. EQ itself blends the two notions in *QSE-2010* where it explains that schools' marketing strategies should aim to "increase Education Queensland's share of school enrolments" as well as "enhance the image of teaching and the public perception of teachers; [and] promote schools as essential to communities and their development" (Education Queensland, 1999a, p.26). Public relations is often regarded as a subdivision of marketing and as the two practices may *seem* to share aims, strategies and tactics it is often extremely difficult to determine where public relations begins and marketing ends. However, given that public relations and marketing have the capacity (at least) to develop increasingly different aims and outcomes, as well as variations in techniques and approaches, this distinction is an important one to make: it is a distinction that is beginning to be very important in schools.

In recent years, therefore, Australian education authorities have been telling schools they need to market themselves, to see themselves as "free standing, entrepreneurial small businesses" (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1998, p.48) aiming to maximise profits – or at least to minimise losses. However, a great deal of academic debate and rhetoric is emerging – often from those self-same education authorities – around the role of schools as sites for the living enactment of social justice agendas or manufactories of social capital. Some commentators – such as Anderson (1999) and McCombs (2003) in America, and Cranston (2000) in Australia – have suggested that recent years have seen a significant moment or turning point in the entire form and function of education systems throughout the world. At an international symposium conducted at the April 2002 meeting of the American Educational Research Association (cited in McCombs, 2003) a trend was identified towards "a refocusing on the centrality of relationships in the process of education" (p.99). Certainly in Australia the federal government has been encouraging schools to implement macro-organisational reforms based on a framework of school-based management, leading to the development and/or strengthening of community relationships. The influential Adelaide Declaration signalled a clear move towards prioritising the achievement of specific "common and agreed goals" including the "further strengthening [of] schools as learning communities where teachers, students and their families work in partnership with business, industry and the wider community" (MCEETYA, 1999).

The idea that schools should prioritise community relations and stakeholder engagement amongst other social justice agendas – via the fostering of dialogic relationships with the community – rapidly gained ascendency in the education management literature of the mid-1990s onwards (Griffiths, 1998). The twin drivers of business and social justice agendas are now both prominent in the theory surrounding the conduct of schools' non-reporting communication contact with their publics. However, it is possible to argue that, in reality, thus far the business agenda has been prioritised. Yet the buzzwords of "community relations" and "stakeholder engagement" are becoming increasingly popular in the rhetoric surrounding how schools *should* function. In Queensland, these changes have been perceived not as "a radical new divergence…rather another step in an evolutionary process" (Education Queensland, 1999b). Cranston (2000) reiterates that Education Queensland's

aim for a number of years has been “greater devolution for decision-making to the local level” (p.124). In the *Education and Other Legislation Amendment Act, 1997* (cited in Beere & Dempster, 1998) the Queensland government expressed a clear expectation (but not at that stage a mandatory requirement) that schools in the state should set up school councils to act as portals for the wider community to access the functioning of schools. However, it seems that the natural pace of such developments in Queensland was slower than in other states and territories. The potential scope for community/school interactions generally was encapsulated in the continuum devised by Beere and Dempster (1998). This shows that by the late 1990s, Queensland was lagging behind in the development of truly dialogic community relations upheld in law compared to other state education authorities.



(Beere & Dempster, 1998, p.5)

This continuum outlines a range of possibilities for involvement from informing through influence to co-determination. This latter kind of symmetrical dialogic communication satisfies the vision that “is…central to the task of educational leadership – not a weak concept of dialogue interpreted as strategies for communicating but a strong concept of dialogue as a way of being” (Shields, 2004, p.115). It is not unreasonable therefore to expect that the establishment, maintenance, and implementation of two-way, reflexive, mutually-responsive and equitable public relations between schools and other groups and individuals in the community should be an important priority for schools.

This expectation was formally explicated in *Queensland State Education – 2010* (*QSE-2010*), which was developed at least in partial response to the perceived ‘falling behind’ of Queensland state schools in areas such as that highlighted by Beere and Dempster above. *QSE-2010* is an influential document spelling out amongst other things that “[s]chools have…the primary responsibility for the relationship between schools and the community” (Education Queensland, 1999a, p.10). Clear aims and objectives in this area are specified for Queensland state schools, including a need for schools to negotiate accountability for their performance with their communities. This will be achieved by the creation of school councils and “other models for involving parents” (Education Queensland, 1999a, p.20), which clearly establishes the

link between dialogic practices and community relations. In order for this consultative, collaborative form of school administration to emerge there is a clear, if tacitly understood, need for a managed flow of communication *in both directions* between schools and their publics. The end result of this is a definite (albeit unacknowledged) role for public relations practitioners and/or practices in the establishment of a relationship or partnership between the parties.

The priorities of these developments in school organisational culture are also reflected in the current plethora of literature based around the importance of creating, developing and enhancing relations between schools and communities. The need to empower communities through meaningful dialogue with schools is an area receiving particular attention. This increasing emphasis can be seen not only in America (Furman, 1998; Gallagher, Bagin, & Kindred, 1997; Merz & Furman, 1997; Sheldon, 2003), but also in the United Kingdom (Arthur & Bailey, 2000; Foster, 1989) and Australia (Cranston et al., 2000; Gamage, 1998). The literature in this area indicates that 'community' has two meanings in this context, neither of which should be viewed as being necessarily mutually exclusive. It can mean a collection of individuals, bound together by shared interests, aims or geographical location; but it can equally well refer to the more abstract "sense of belonging, trust of others, and safety" (Furman, 1998, p.300) that is sometimes referred to as *Gemeinschaft* (Merz & Furman, 1997; Sutton, 1994; Tonnies, 1988/1957). The link between public relations theory and practice and the creation of community – in either of these senses – is well established in literature. For example, Kruckeberg (2000) states that "…public relations is best defined and practiced as an active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community" (p.145), and this reinforces the claim of public relations to have a voice in these discussions. In the field of education, the importance of developing relationships between schools and communities is an area that has very much come to the fore in recent years, even though the potential role of public relations theory and practice in achieving desired outcomes in this area remains largely unrecognised.

Of course, the social justice/capital agenda facilitated through community dialogue has not completely overwritten the marketing imperative. Indeed some commentators have noted that

> Schools have been steered [by Australian governments] towards 'free' market mores, manners and morals, but within the tight rein of state government and Federal Government policies which now imply that school systems are primarily investments in human and political capital, and national and state identity. (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1998, p.48)

This neatly encapsulates the duality of the forces currently shaping and guiding the nature of the communicative interaction between schools and their publics. A similar bilateral developmental trend has been noted by EQ:

> Schools are now complex administrative units, with marketing, resource management, accountability and business functions to support their educational role. The competitive market they operate in requires professional skill in these functions. It also requires schools to

> ensure that the public interest is not overtaken by the operations of the market. (Education Queensland, 1999a, p.19)

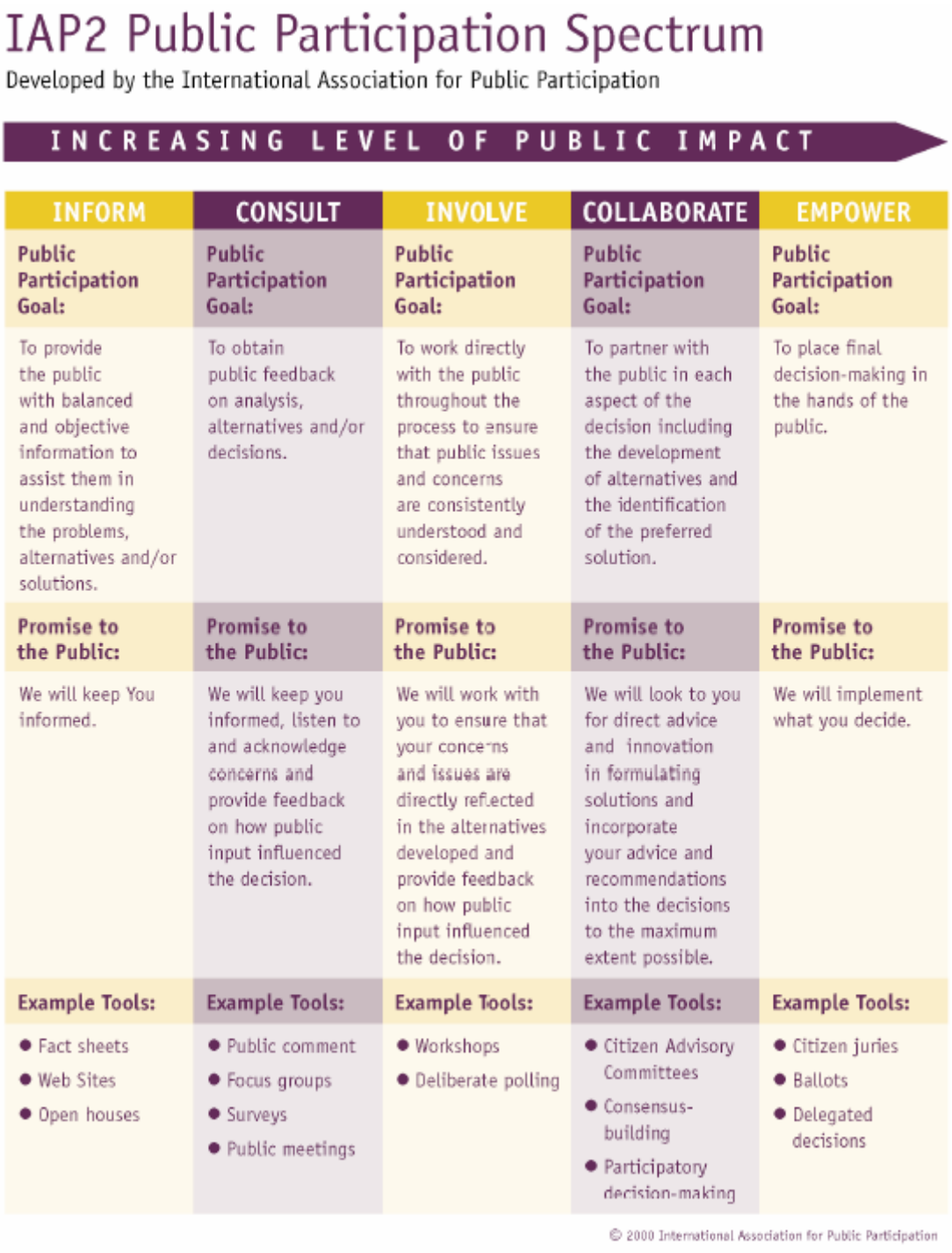
It seems therefore that the public relations agenda is being increasingly favoured in law and academic rhetoric above that of business. But since so little is known about the role of public relations in this context, many questions about the realities of these activities – both in terms of scope and effectiveness – remain unanswered. In order to begin addressing the perceived knowledge/information gap surrounding the role of public relations in Australian schools, a small pilot study (Lane, 2002) was carried out in 2002 in south east Queensland[4]. For the purposes of this research, a broad working definition of public relations as *the creation, maintenance and enhancement of relationships between organisations and publics through the utilisation of managed channels of communication* was used: specific references to 'public relations' were avoided as far as possible in order not to confuse respondents or prejudice responses. The findings of this study reveal that all the respondent schools were carrying out public relations functions to some extent. Having established – albeit in a very basic way – that public relations (indicated by the presence of managed channels of communication) is indeed being carried out in these schools, further questions were asked to ascertain the extent and nature of relevant practices. The case studies also supplied many and varied examples of the way in which schools communicate, including verbally in assemblies and in pastoral care sessions, and in writing through newsletters and e-mails. Other responses indicated that in the context of schools, public relations might be seen to encompass a number of functions such as:

- Planning and preparation of brochures and enrolment packages,
- Creating and maintaining good relations with local media,
- Facilitating information flows between school and community,
- Raising funds through events and sponsorships, and
- Managing issues and crises.

Data obtained in this way were then viewed through the lens of the public participation spectrum devised by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) (International Association for Public Participation, 2000). This particular tool was used to conduct the analysis largely because of the clarity of its expression, and the apparent similarities between its ultimate model (Empower) and the putative normative paradigms of both education and public relations. The IAP2 spectrum describes the various different levels at which the public can be involved in the decision-making and operational processes of institutions. Along a continuum of increasing public participation, possibilities range from *'Inform'* through *'Consent'* and *'Involve'* to *'Collaborate'* and ultimately *'Empower'*. An overview of the current legal requirements and academic rhetoric pertaining to Queensland schools placed against this framework would lead to the conclusion that EQ's encouragement of state schools to develop attitudes and systems that prioritise community

[4] Fifty six schools responded to a questionnaire survey, and three (identified as School W, School X and School Y) took part in in-depth case studies. The limited size and scope of the research mean that no generalisable or predictive results are claimed: this is an exploratory and descriptive project.

relations and stakeholder engagement should see a majority of their activities under the heading of *'Involve'*. In other words, schools are expected to seek out public opinion on matters of concern and to develop systems that allow for the incorporation of information determined in this way. Indeed, it might also be argued that an interpretation of the spirit of the law in this area could (should?) result in schools looking to their publics "for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions", and incorporating those recommendations into decisions "to the maximum extent possible", which are signifiers of the *'Collaborate'* model.



IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum

Developed by the International Association for Public Participation

INCREASING LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT

INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Public Participation Goal:	**Public Participation Goal:**	**Public Participation Goal:**	**Public Participation Goal:**	**Public Participation Goal:**
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
Promise to the Public:	**Promise to the Public:**	**Promise to the Public:**	**Promise to the Public:**	**Promise to the Public:**
We will keep You informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and issues are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
Example Tools:	**Example Tools:**	**Example Tools:**	**Example Tools:**	**Example Tools:**
• Fact sheets • Web Sites • Open houses	• Public comment • Focus groups • Surveys • Public meetings	• Workshops • Deliberate polling	• Citizen Advisory Committees • Consensus-building • Participatory decision-making	• Citizen juries • Ballots • Delegated decisions

Using this spectrum as a basis for the analysis of information from the pilot study leads to some interesting insights. From the data obtained in this limited research, some tentative conclusions may be drawn about the nature of the relationship between the respondent schools and their communities. Progression along the continuum is recognised by comparisons with the descriptions in each category. By this measure, the schools surveyed were probably reaching at least the *'Inform'* level. Via direct contact through newsletters, web sites and brochures as well as coverage in the media, the schools were certainly seeking to provide information to their publics. The additional qualifier of objectivity is, however, open to dispute as much of this information is actually slanted with the deliberate intention of *persuading* publics to a certain point of view. Generally the schools have more out-going communications than incoming, but the differences in most categories between the numbers of schools who send information out and those who receive information are quite small. This indicates that the schools' communication is not unidirectional and does in fact incorporate some sort of capability to handle reverse flow, which is important in determining their relationship-building capacity. This might suggest a move along the spectrum to *'Consult'* is appropriate. What is not clear though is whether this reverse flow is in response to schools' communication, and shows an on-going dialogue; or whether it is part of a concurrent discourse being conducted independently of what schools say. What is also not clear is the effect of this incoming communication on the output of schools. On the basis of this information therefore, it is probably still appropriate to classify respondent schools as being at the *'Inform'* stage.

Most schools reported a number of different people sharing the responsibilities for creating public relations collateral: 35 of the 56 respondents (63%) indicated that this range of outputs was created by three or more different people. This might be interpreted as showing either that most schools do not approach the organisation of their public relations output functions in a unified, strategic fashion; or that the schools are favouring a collaborative approach to the production of their public relations collateral. Schools seem to involve the whole school in the practice of public relations, from the secretary who composes and compiles the weekly newsletter to the administration staff who send out routine media releases. This would support the conclusion that public relations in schools is being practiced as a technical function, rather than as a specialised, management role. This in turn has important implications for the scope of the public relations function in this context. Although no value judgment between these two levels of function is implied, a practitioner at technical level will be unlikely to have much impact on the amount and extent of public involvement in an organisation. Such organisational approaches are evident in organisations that come under the heading of *'Inform'* on the IAP2 spectrum, as they facilitate the outward flow of information but place little or no emphasis on the need for incorporating external feedback.

Two of the three case study schools had formally created public relations practitioners' posts in the 18 months before the interviews were conducted. Such a development may be indicative of a growing realisation of the

relevance and significance for schools of actively managing a set of broader relationships with their publics; and an awareness that this is best achieved by the use of 'corporate' tools, such as public relations. This might therefore signal the early stages of a movement by these schools along the public participation spectrum towards more inclusive models of school governance. However, each of the schools clearly indicated that their principal was the driving force behind the content and tone of their contact with the community. As one school's public relations practitioner put it:

> The vision or image of the school very much comes from the principal. We to and fro on things and my role is to actualise her corporate vision of [our school] in the future. I have quite a key role in decision-making, but my main role is to actualise her vision. (in Lane, 2002, p.101)

There was no indication in any of the contact with respondent schools that the principals had made reference to any other party in determining this vision. On the IAP2 spectrum therefore, even the creation of formal public relations positions does not necessarily mean schools are operating beyond the *'Consult'* level.

All the interviewees were forthcoming on the topic of information flows *from* schools to publics. The main function of these communications was explicitly stated to be the passing on of information from the schools to their publics: for example one school's comment about the purpose of the school magazine was "It's mainly about getting information out there" (in Lane, 2002, p.90). This would again suggest that putting these schools under the heading of *'Inform'* would be appropriate. When asked about the flow of communication from publics *into* their schools – which would have moved them along the scale to at least *'Consult'* – all three interviewees had comparatively little response. Only one school acknowledged any formal facilities for gathering and presenting the views of a public to the school – a focus group, which was at that time in recess due to other pressures.

Interviewees were then asked about their roles as advocates for the school rather than as simple channels for information flows. One respondent gave some answers which clearly pointed to the existence of such a flow of communication in her role:

> There was something of that [advocacy] when we were bringing in changes to the curriculum framework – maths and English were going to be taught separately and HPE and SOSE were going to be combined into integrated studies. We included hints about these changes in the newsletter for parents and monitored any comments – but there weren't many. Then we organised a sit down meeting with those parents who required more explanation before we went ahead with the changes. (in Lane, 2002, p.105)

In this instance, the school made a decision about an issue, presented that decision to its public/s, received feedback, and then adjusted its information flow to address issues raised before going on to implement its original decision. This would suggest that a move along the spectrum to *'Consult'* is

therefore appropriate. In a further demonstration of this type of interaction, the same practitioner spoke about another program.

> When we wanted to bring in our 'Nit Busters' program, we firstly had to sell the idea to the staff and then to the P&C. There were a few concerns about cross-contamination and costing. We then put more information about the program in the newsletter, and I was available to answer any queries that arose. There were about six or seven concerned parents, and I met with them one on one before the program went ahead. (in Lane, 2002, p.106)

Although dialogic or two-way communication takes place in this interaction, there is undeniably unequal participation (individual parents in discussion with professional communicators representing the power and authority of the school) and lack of mutual compromise. Looking at this example in terms of the IAP2 spectrum, the surveyed school might be said to be appropriately included under the *'Consult'* heading. This was a clear example of a school listening and acknowledging the concerns of its publics while continuing to pursue its own agenda. Other schools also provided examples of interactions that might place their schools under the heading of *'Consult'*: School W mentioned his general 'open door' policy to facilitate communication with parents and others, and School Y identified that they had formal facilities for gathering and presenting the views of publics to her school – the temporarily-suspended focus group mentioned previously.

School Y's public relations practitioner indicated that the creation and maintenance of relationships with publics was a very high priority for her school, and had direct benefits for the organisation. She explained that the level of debate and discussion over issues that her school fostered gave people "a high level of ownership of the decisions", leading to a minimisation of conflict and disputes. Such descriptions tend to give the impression that this school is functioning at the level of at least *'Collaborate'*, which is specifically recognised by its participatory decision-making processes. However, the actual commitment of the school to such practices must be questioned when the sole consensus-building apparatus is put to one side when the pressures of the day-to-day operations of the curriculum are found to be overriding.

The interviewees were also asked whether they had ever assisted in presenting the views and opinions of publics to schools. This was taken to be a fair indication of the potential presence of interactions under the heading of *'Involve'*. Only one school could come up with an example of such an interaction:

> We [the public relations department] were initiators of the bus runs. We thought there was a need for a school bus, but the school weren't really interested. It had been tried before and hadn't succeeded. But we went out and surveyed families in areas covered by the proposed routes and went back to the school. We pointed out that it would be cutting student travelling time in half for some, and that it would be helpful in seeding enrolments. We suggested using our own buses

> and drivers, so that it would be easier to keep direct control over things. Another important aspect was that having our own service would avoid rivalry [with other schools] at the interchange, which would help keep a clean profile for the school. We were looking to raise the school's profile and keep it clean, and we thought the bus was a good idea. Eventually the school said yes, and it's been a huge success. (in Lane, 2002, p.108)

In this example, the school made a shift in its position to accommodate the expressed needs of a public. This would clearly put this interaction under the heading of *'Collaborate'.* Progression to the *'Empower'* model is not appropriate though as the decision-making power still remains with the school. Indeed, it seems that few of the surveyed schools have communication mechanisms in place to enable external groups to contribute meaningfully to the decision-making apparatus. Those schools that do have mechanisms of a sort often use them in an advisory or consultative capacity only: the schools have no desire to devolve power or decision-making capacity to their publics. These findings may well indicate that advocates of improved community relations still have to contend with the reluctance of some education professionals to allow input from non-professionals. Gamage (1998), writing from an Australian perspective, contends that such mind-sets are still observable in schools.

In summary, the findings of this exploratory and descriptive research clearly indicate a change in emphasis in recent years in the form and function of education systems in Queensland, which in turn have impacted significantly on the conduct of schools' public relations. The marketing imperative or economic rationalist approach, which had risen to prominence in the last decade of the 20th century, is being tempered by the emergence of attitudes that see schools as sites for the fostering of social justice agendas. Like the heads of Dr Dolittle's fabulous pushmi-pullyu, the two 'drivers' of marketisation and social justice might sometimes work together but the capacity for tension and even discord between the two is significant. The conclusions of this limited pilot study clearly indicate that there is somewhat of a disparity between theory and practice in the development of community relations and stakeholder engagements in the surveyed schools. Legal and academic rhetoricians strongly advocate interactions between schools and their publics that could appropriately come under the heading of *'Involve'* or *'Collaborate'* on the IAP2 spectrum: yet most of those discovered in this research would be appropriate to the *'Inform'* or *'Consult'* columns, but no higher. This poses some interesting problems and a serious reality check for school public relations practitioners, acknowledged or not. As they attempt to ride the pushmi-pullyu into the 21st century, do school public relations practitioners know where they're going – and how to get there?

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